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Another spring record of Tristram's Bunting *Emberiza tristrami* from Mishmi Hills, Arunachal Pradesh

On 22 March 2023, birding guide PP and his client Avinash Bhagat photographed a single Tristram's Bunting *Emberiza tristrami* a little above Tiwari Gaon (28.22°N, 95.83°E; 1,500 m asl), Mishmi Hills, Arunachal Pradesh, India. The bird was seen only once and not reported subsequently. When Hemant Kirola and I started a birding tour with PP in early April, we enquired about any recent sighting of Tristram's Bunting and whether there was a chance to see it. He informed us that it had not been reported by anyone else since 22 March and was possibly no longer in the area. However, on 09 April 2023, we found a single Tristram's Bunting at Tiwari Gaon. Subsequently, we again saw and photographed the same bird on 10 April 2023 in the same location.

On the afternoon of 09 April 2023, the three of us were breaking for lunch at Tiwari Gaon, during which Hemant and I decided to sit on the balcony of the eatery overlooking the valley. We had hardly sat down to eat when an interesting bunting caught my attention. Since my camera was in the car, I asked Hemant to quickly give me his camera so that I could take a photograph of the bird [212]. The bird was perched on a bare branch of a dry bush and was associated with a small flock of about five Little Buntings *E. pusilla*. This individual was visibly different from the Little Buntings due to the absence of red on the face or crown. Additionally, the facial and head markings were distinct – a white central crown stripe bordered by a broad black

stripe which contrasted with a bold white supercilium. The ear coverts had a small back mark and a white dot. Additionally, the bird had a rufous rump. When we showed the photographs to PP, he confirmed that it was indeed Tristram's Bunting. The bird was foraging in a small patch of scrub right below the eatery at Tiwari Gaon. There was some food waste and garbage that the eatery had dumped in the spot where the buntings (both Little and Tristram's) were feeding. The Tristram's Bunting was a little more skittish compared to the Little Buntings. When disturbed by dogs or humans nearby, it would fly away and take cover in the dense bushes and not reappear for a long time. The Little Buntings, on the other hand, would take cover in similar bushes but reappear and come back to feed within 5 and 10 minutes. Subsequently, on the morning of 10 April, while we were birding around Tiwari Gaon, there was a sudden downpour. To take cover, we proceeded to the same eatery. When we scanned the scrub from the balcony, we again saw a Tristram's Bunting feeding in the rain alongside a couple of Little Buntings.

Overall, this is possibly only the third year that this species has been recorded from India. All records are from Arunachal Pradesh. The first record was from Namdapha National Park on 18 December 2011 (Naniwadekar et al. 2013). The second year of sightings from India was seven years ago, in 2016 (Thangaraj & Mani 2016). It was found in the company of Little Bunting and Rufous-breasted Accentor *Prunella strophias* between 04 March and 28 March 2016 in the same location as the 2023 sightings reported in this work. The two sightings on 22 March 2023 and 10 April 2023 in two places along the same road suggest that either there was one individual that stayed on for at least 20 days or there were multiple birds that were in passage migration through the area. Sighting of this species in the same location during the passage season, and not before or after, suggests that Tristram's Bunting could be a scarce passage migrant through Northeast India. On the other hand, the first-ever record being from December, could also imply that it is a rare winter vagrant to Northeast India. Given its rarity and tendency to associate with a common species like Little Bunting, it is possible that it is getting overlooked in the region. Therefore, we encourage people birding in the region during the winter, as well as in March and April, to keep a lookout for this species, especially in mixed flocks of Little Buntings.

References

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212. Tristram's Bunting from Mishmi Hills.

In Memoriam

ARUN BHATIA

(2 FEBRUARY 1935 – 14 NOVEMBER 2023)